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ABSTRACT

Results of a survey aimed at determining the role and function of department heads at eight U.S. colleges and universities are presented. Two colleges were selected for each of four categories of institutions: service academies, military colleges, former military colleges and nonmilitary colleges. Data are provided on: departmental emphasis, academic rank and length of service of department heads, tasks of department heads, method of selection, permanance of position, identification with the next highest level of the university hierarchy, and authority. The authoritarian leadership model presented by department heads at the U.S. Air Force Academy is discussed. (SPG)

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THE DEPARTMENT HEAD: A STUDY OF AN AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP MODEL IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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by

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J. Douglas Brown, former dean of the faculty at Princeton University, has maintained that "the central leadership of a university should have the authority to select its subleaders."[1] Without that central authority, today's college or university is losing its sense of community, its sense of common purpose, and is becoming, in the words of Robert Hutchins, "a series of separate schools and departments held together by a central heating system."[2] The primary identification of the department leader must be redirected from the department to the institution if a sense of community is to be restored within the American college or university. The pressure

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[1] J. Douglas Brown, "Departmental and University Leadership," Academic Departments, ed. by Dean E. McHenry (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977), p. 190.

[2] Clark Kerr, The Uses of the University (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 20.

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of accountability is encouraging the return of significant authority to central administration. It is time for America's academic community to consider a return to the leadership model of department head.

No study of the role perceptions of department heads at several American colleges and universities had ever been conducted, although calls for studies on departmental leadership had appeared in the literature of higher education.[3] The support for this study of department leadership came from the Citadel Development Foundation. It was hoped that the study would lead to clearer perceptions of the roles and functions of academic department heads: Who were they? What did they do? How did they relate to other critical groups? How were they selected? How long were their terms? What were their perceptions of authority? How satisfied were they with their positions?

Design of the Study

The study was conducted in three phases. First, an instrument was developed consisting of questions regarding the role and function of the academic department head. Second, this questionnaire was mailed to department heads at eight American colleges and universities. Colleges were

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[3]Paul L. Dressel, F. Craig Johnson, and Philip M. Marcus, The Confidence Crisis (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1971), p. 243.

selected for the study in a stratified manner. Two colleges were selected for each of the four categories of institution: (1) service academies (the United States Military Academy at West Point and the United States Air Force Academy at Colorado); (2) military colleges - civilian colleges organized on military lines similar to those maintained at the service academies (The Citadel and North Georgia College); (3) former military colleges (Texas Agricultural & Mechanical University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University); and (4) non-military colleges (Auburn University and California Polytechnic State University). Eighty nine percent (89%) of the surveyed department heads (230 of 258) responded to the questionnaire. Third, the returns were analyzed. A summary of the results was sent to all surveyed department heads. It was hoped that the empirical design of the study would provide a fairly accurate picture of the role perceptions of department heads at eight American colleges and universities.

Developing the Questionnaire

Two concepts weighed heavily in developing the survey instrument: role segmentation and ambivalence. The role picture of the department head was segmented into several distinct parts. John J. Corson suggested that four

relationships determined the role picture of the department leader: relations with other administrators, relations with departmental associates, relations with students, and relations with faculty governing groups.[4] Each of these relationships assumed different degrees of significance within different departments at different colleges and universities. Which relationships were most important? Which relationships were most time-consuming? The answers to these questions could help develop a clearer role picture of the department head.

The traditional interpretation of the department head's role picture as a person torn between responsibilities to faculty and obligations to administration had to be expanded to include consideration of other groups: students, faculty governing committees, and other department heads. These groups represented new pressures on the functioning department head. Comparing the academic department head to the foreman of industry was no longer adequate. Not only management (administration) and labor (faculty) could claim the attention of the department head, but other groups could and did on many campuses. "Even in the most tranquil of times, the chairman finds his loyalties and responsibilities divided among his disciplinary colleagues, his

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[4] John J. Corson, Governance of Colleges and Universities (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1960), pp. 88-92.

students, and the administrators above him--three groups with immense differences in goals, attitudes, needs, and yardsticks of approval."[5] The voices of students were heard more persistently at the departmental level. Their power increased as universities were faced with fewer applicants and dropping enrollments. How did department heads view their relationship with students? The role set of the department head had to be expanded to include new relationships. Shared authority was becoming more and more a part of university governance. The department head was increasingly affected by new groups involved in the governance process - students, faculty governing committees, and other department heads.

Charles Heimler's synthesis of Edward Doyle's work[6] resulted in a list of sixteen tasks included as part of the job description of today's department head.[7] Zucker and Wattenbarger's research led to the addition of one

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[5]James Brann, "The Chairman: An Impossible Job About to Become Tougher," The Academic Department or Division Chairman: A Complex Role, ed. by James Brann and Thomas A. Emmet (Detroit: Balamp Publishing, 1972), p. 5.

[6]Edward A. Doyle, The Status and Functions of the Departmental Chairman (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953).

[7]Charles H. Heimler, "The College Departmental Chairman," Educational Record, XLVIII (Spring 1967), p. 159.

task and the revision of several others.[8] These considerations provided the rationale for the development of the survey instrument.

Authority and the Department Leader

The authority of the department leader, whether chairman or head, was not well-defined in the literature of higher education. Nor had it crystallized in the operation of colleges and universities. Leslie's research represents a significant attempt to deal with this perplexing subject.[9] Nevertheless, the department leader was being held accountable for departmental actions. The department leader's responsibilities often exceeded the authority that he or she had been granted by the dean. Authority, the ascribed right to exercise control over others and their resources, had been slowly diminishing at all levels of the university structure. The power of the president, the dean, and the department chairman was declining in relative terms.[10]

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[8] Jacob D. Zucker and James L. Wattenbarger, The Department Chairman: An Analysis in Two Parts (Gainesville: Institute of Higher Education, University of Florida, 1974).

[9] David W. Leslie, "The Status of the Department Chairmanship in University Organization," AAUP Bulletin, LIX (December 1973), pp. 419-426.

[10] Edward Gross and Paul V. Grambsch, Change in University Organization, 1964-1971 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), pp. 165-166.

The student protests of the sixties coupled with the financial hard times of the seventies seriously challenged traditional notions of authority. As part of that challenge, the distribution of authority among the various members of the university community came under question as it had not for several decades.

Was today's department head an authoritarian leader? An authoritarian personality is characterized by a dependence upon clearly delineated hierarchies of authority. Was the department head selected by his or her dean? Would the department head describe his or her position in the hierarchy as being permanent? Was the department head's primary identification with his or her college? In how many areas did the department head perceive him or herself to have sufficient authority to act without consulting other members of the department? Did the department head perceive his or her influence on departmental affairs as being greater than that of others? Finally, how did the department head feel about his or her service as department head? The answers to these questions could help determine whether or not today's department head was, in fact, an authoritarian leader.

Sampling

In developing the design for the study of department

heads, two approaches were considered. The first involved selecting a random sample from among the seventy-four (74) American colleges and universities that employed the term *department head*.[11] The second approach, which was ultimately chosen, involved selecting the sample in a stratified manner. Two institutions would be selected each representing one of four categories of institution: service academies, military colleges, former military colleges, and non-military colleges. While this would weaken the randomness of the sample, the approach would allow an analysis of the department head on a continuum, from the most authoritarian service academy department heads to the least authoritarian non-military college department heads. It was hoped that an examination of this continuum would provide insights about the role picture of the department head. The eight institutions of the sample were arranged on a continuum from the federal service acacemies (believed to have the most authoritarian organizational structure) through the non-military colleges (believed to have the least authoritarian structure). Each institution on the continuum was assigned a number by which it would be represented in the tables of the study. The institutions as

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[11] Yearbook of Higher Education, 1976-77 (eighth edition; Chicago: Marquis Academic Media, 1976), pp. 5-513.

arranged and numbered on the continuum were: the federal service academies of the United States Military Academy at West Point (1) and the United States Air Force Academy at Colorado (2); the military colleges of The Citadel (3) and North Georgia College (4); the former military colleges of Texas Agricultural & Mechanical University (5) and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (6); and the non-military colleges of Auburn University (7) and California Polytechnic State University (8). At all eight of the institutions, department leaders used the title *department head*.

Departmental Emphasis

Instruction was perceived as receiving the greatest departmental emphasis in all eight institutions. Faculty development and counseling received greater emphasis in the service academies and military colleges; research received greater emphasis in the former and non-military colleges.

The Head in His or Her Department

The academic rank of department heads in the sample was eighty-one percent (81%) full professor, seventeen percent (17%) associate professor, and two percent (2%) assis-

tant professor. They had served as department heads for an average of eight years at the time of the survey (May, 1977) and had been members of their departments for an average of thirteen years.

The department head, on the basis of academic rank and average length of service, appeared to be a somewhat powerful figure. As a senior faculty member with an average of eight years service as department head, he or she had ample time to establish a strong communication network throughout the institution. As Wilbert J. McKeachie noted, "the acquisition of power depends partly on the length of the chairman's term."[12]

Tasks of the Department Head

When asked to approximate the percent of their time spent on administrative duties, the department heads indicated an average of sixty-nine percent (69%). In none of the eight institutions was the percent of time spent on administrative duties less than fifty percent (50%). With what specific administrative tasks were the department heads concerned?

The five tasks felt by department heads to be their

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[12]Wilbert J. McKeachie, "Reactions from a Former Department Chairman," Examining Departmental Management, ed. by John C. Smart and James R. Montgomery (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1976), pp. 117-118.

most important were those of leadership by persuasion within their institutions, evaluating faculty and staff, recruiting faculty, developing programs, and improving instruction. The task of supervising faculty and staff received more attention from military department heads; the task of administering the departmental budget received more attention from non-military department heads. The department head was an administrator both in terms of the percent of time he or she spent on administrative duties and in terms of actual administrative tasks performed. "More and more, one observed a certain phenomenon, one strange to university ways. Men were now being chosen for chairmanships, deanships, and presidencies not because they were necessarily among the light and the leading of the academic community but because they had something called *administrative ability*."[13]

Paul Dressel and Lewis Mayhew observed that "higher education as a body of knowledge possesses no distinctive approaches, methods, or concepts; it results largely from uses of methods and concepts drawn from the disciplines and applied to the study of higher education."[14] The

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[13]Robert Nisbet, The Degradation of the Academic Dogma: The University in America, 1945-1970 (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), pp. 76-77.

[14]Paul L. Dressel and Lewis B. Mayhew, Higher Education as a Field of Study (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1974), p. 147.

field of role analysis with its concepts of set, conflict, and ambiguity proved of great value at this point of the study. Drawn from the disciplines of psychology and sociology, role analysis offered new prisms through which to view the department head. The works of Kahn[15] and Roethlisberger[16] offered many useful insights for the application of role analysis. As Clark Kerr noted, "Old concepts...of faculty-administration roles are being changed at a rate without parallel."[17] What was happening to the role of today's department head?

The department head's two most important relationships were identified as those with upper-level administrators and those with departmental associates. In three of the eight institutions, however, students replaced upper-level administrators as one of the two most important relationships of the department head. From this data it could be contended that the department head's relationship with students was growing in importance. The relationship with departmental associates appeared to take

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[15]Robert L. Kahn, Donald M. Wolfe, Robert P. Quinn, and J. Diedrick Snoek, Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964).

[16]F. J. Roethlisberger, Man-in-Organization (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

[17]Kerr, Uses of the University, p. vi.

up more of the department head's time than any other one. This was not surprising considering the fact that four of the department head's five most important tasks involved the faculty. Upper-level administrators and faculty governing committees appeared to take up more of the military department head's time; students appeared to take up more of the non-military department head's time. The two most difficult relationships of department heads were identified as those with upper-level administrators and those with faculty governing committees. The two most satisfying relationships were identified as those with students and those with departmental associates.

The Authoritarian Leadership Model

In order to determine whether the department head was indeed an authoritarian leader, several questions were asked of the department heads at the eight institutions. First, how were they selected for their positions? Were the department heads selected by a decision from above or by a consensus of their peers?

Thirty-four percent (34%) of the department heads indicated that they were selected solely by their deans. Fifty-eight percent (58%) identified a selection method in which both dean and faculty were involved. Only eight percent (8%) perceived their selection as being solely by

their faculties. It appears that the selection of department heads is a process dominated by deans. The first criterion of the model, that of a method of selection from above, was satisfied.

TABLE 1

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR TERM OF OFFICE AS DEPARTMENT HEAD AS PERMANENT?*

	Federal Service Academies		*Military Colleges*		*Former Military Colleges*		*Non-Military Colleges*		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total Sample
Yes	100%	100%	72%	87%	49%	70%	63%	74%	73%
No	0	0	14	13	49	28	30	14	27

*Some of the department heads did not respond to this question.

A second criterion, permanence of position, was also satisfied. Permanence of leadership is a characteristic of an authoritarian structure just as rotation of leadership is a characteristic of a non-authoritarian one. The department heads of the service academies were unanimous in viewing their positions as being permanent.

TABLE 2

OF WHICH GROUP DO YOU SEE YOURSELF PRIMARILY A MEMBER?*

	Federal Service Academies		Military Colleges		Former Military Colleges		Non-Military Colleges		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total Sample
Your College	100%	62%	50%	33%	4%	12%	15%	8%	22%
Your Department	0	38	50	53	78	67	70	75	65
Your Field of Study	0	0	0	7	11	20	15	17	13

*Some of the department heads did not respond to this question.

A third criterion for the authoritarian leadership model was primary identification with the next highest level of the university hierarchy. The military department heads appeared to be the only leaders satisfying this criterion. They saw the college as receiving their primary loyalty. The non-military department heads identified more readily with their departments and fields of study.

TABLE 3

AREAS IN WHICH DEPARTMENT HEADS CAN
ACT WITHOUT CONSULTING OTHER FACULTY MEMBERS

	Federal Service Academics		Military Colleges		Former Military Colleges		Non-Military Colleges		Total Sample
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Assistantships	18%	23%	0%	27%	56%	33%	33%	22%	31%
Curriculum requirements	27	23	7	47	29	7	3	14	16
Instructional assignment	82	92	43	40	49	42	35	41	47
Leaves of absence	73	92	43	40	69	38	65	41	55
New faculty selection	82	100	14	33	36	11	15	5	27
Office space	27	92	36	67	67	51	63	57	58
Promotions	18	46	0	73	47	7	5	3	20
Salary increases	0	8	7	87	71	70	78	14	50
Supplies	45	62	57	67	84	70	85	84	75
Tenure	0	46	0	80	31	7	0	0	15

A fourth criterion for the authoritarian leadership model was sufficient authority to act *without* consulting other members of the unit. This criterion explored the limits of perceived authority. It would appear from table three that the department heads of the United States Air Force Academy perceived the highest authority to act with-

out consulting other faculty members.

Regarding the criterion of perceived influence on departmental affairs, department heads saw their influence as being predominant. Interestingly, while the second highest influence over departmental affairs was accorded to senior faculty members by the military sample, the non-military group identified the department faculty as a whole as occupying the second level. It would appear that the hierarchy-consciousness of the military department heads was influencing their departments' internal operations. The department heads of the federal service academies again satisfied the criterion most closely.

TABLE 4

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING PHRASES BEST DESCRIBES YOUR FEELINGS TOWARD SERVING AS DEPARTMENT HEAD?*

	Federal Service Academies		*Military Colleges*		*Former Military Colleges*		*Non-Military Colleges*		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total Sample
Very satisfied	55%	92%	57%	40%	31%	36%	45%	43%	46%
Satisfied	27	8	29	47	53	49	38	33	42
Less-than-satisfied	9	0	7	13	11	11	10	20	12

*Some of the department heads did not respond to this question.

The department heads at the eight institutions were satisfied with their more-or-less authoritarian positions. The most satisfied department heads were found at the United States Air Force Academy. (See table four.)

Selected largely by their deans, serving mostly permanent terms, the authoritarian department heads of the Air Force Academy perceived their influence on departmental affairs as exceeding that of their faculties taken as a whole and that of the senior members of their respective departments.

Department Heads of the Air Force Academy

At the United States Air Force Academy, the authoritarian leadership model was realized most completely. By far the most satisfied of all the department heads, these leaders were also the most powerful. (See tables three and four.) They described their responsibilities as seventy-five percent (75%) administrative and their loyalties as institutional. (See table two.) Only at the United States Military Academy was loyalty more centrally focused. Working closely with the senior members of their respective departments, the department heads of the Air Force Academy ruled their domains with a clear sense of authority. (See table three.) Typical of the more authoritarian department leaders in the sample, the most satisfying

relationship of the Air Force Academy department heads was with students. Their most time-consuming and most difficult relationship was with faculty governing committees. The department leaders of the Air Force Academy perceived their primary task as the supervision of faculty and staff. They saw themselves as line administrators and experienced fewer internal problems in acting out their leadership roles. More than any other group of department leaders studied, the department heads of the United States Air Force Academy functioned according to an older academic model of department leadership. It is their model of leadership that could be considered by other colleges and universities wishing to restore a sense of academic community to their institutions. The primary loyalty of the Air Force Academy department heads was to their college, the United States Air Force Academy. The need for accountability and the need for community suggest that this model of centralized departmental leadership be considered by other institutions in America's academic community.

Conclusions

On the basis of the high level of role satisfaction of department heads at the Air Force Academy, it appears that the problems of ambivalence and role ambiguity might be resolved by shifting more authority to the department

leader. The department leader could occupy a line position from which he or she could lead the academic unit guided by increased institutional perspective. The traditional title of *department head* could be employed to denote this new line position.

Like his or her counterparts at other institutions of higher learning in America, the military department head is at times bewildered by the many different roles and functions he or she is called upon to perform. Yet unlike his or her counterparts in the general collegiate community, the military department head has managed to avoid the dilemma of ambivalence by assuming an authoritative leadership role. It may be time to reconsider the merits of the authoritarian leadership model found in America's military colleges and service academies - the model of *department head*.

> "This is the first necessity: the restorati n of the authority of the president of the university, and of the provosts, deans, and department chairmen, in whose hands responsibility is placed for the governance of the university... Without such restoration of authority there is no possibility of arresting present encroachments upon the autonomy of the university: encroachments by legislature, governor, federal agency, and police."[18]

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[18]Nisbet, Degradation, p. 215.